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Judgments - Part 2

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STATE/INR-CIA-NSA INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM*

THE NEXT TWO YEARS: BREZHNEV, OR A SUCCESSION?
IMPLICATIONS FOR US POLICY

KEY JUDGMENTS

How do we estimate Brezhnev's current personal and political health? What are the chances of his leaving power in the next year or two?

--Barring an unlikely but unpredictable heart attack or stroke, there is no specific reason to expect Brezhnev to die or be incapacitated enough to have to leave office in the next year or two.

--Whether Brezhnev will be removed or eased into figurehead status by his colleagues is also essentially unforeseeable. If this should happen, we judge that the real cause would probably be his colleagues' perceptions that Brezhnev was no longer consistent or vigorous enough to run the country, or--perhaps somewhat less likely--that the balance of his power and the collective's urgently needed redressing.

* This paper was prepared under the auspices of the NIO for the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, with State/INR and CIA drafting. It was reviewed by working level specialists on the Soviet leadership of State/INR, CIA, and NSA.

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--On balance, we think there is a better than even chance that Brezhnev will remain in office for the next year or two.

If Brezhnev leaves power within the next year or two, how long and orderly or otherwise is the early succession period likely to be?

--Brezhnev himself is unlikely to want or be able to arrange the succession definitively.

--His departure from office in the next year or two would give Kirilenko a better than even, say 60 percent chance of becoming general secretary. All things considered, however, a reasonable estimate of the probability that Kirilenko would be able to consolidate his rule and maintain it for several years is less than even, say 30 percent and the greater likelihood is that of a two-stage succession involving someone like Politburo member and Party Secretary Kulakov. While Kirilenko was maneuvering to consolidate power, the leadership would probably have difficulty taking decisions on complex policy matters.

--The USSR currently faces serious economic and political problems, and the economic ones, in particular, are expected to worsen during the next

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half-dozen years. These problems will probably cause considerable division within the leadership, complicating efforts by Kirilenko or others to resolve an early Brezhnev succession and consolidate power. It is thus more likely than not that the early years of the succession will be more troubled, at least within leadership circles.

--There is an outside chance, say 10 percent, that a strong, innovative, new general secretary will emerge to capitalize on the manifest need to rejuvenate the Politburo, Central Committee, and middle levels of the party as well as to stimulate the economy. But historically the system has penalized innovations and risk takers.

What are the short-term policy implications of the succession for the US?

--In the foregoing circumstances that we think most likely, the leadership will be more collegial than it has been in the recent past and will probably avoid taking foreign policy initiatives with far-reaching implications, although foreign policy issues could become the forum for political maneuvering within the leadership. Soviet foreign policy focus

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is likely to be on urgent matters rather than on items which require long-term planning and consensus-building among varied elite groups. The leadership would of course respond vigorously to perceived significant threats to Soviet security or interests. Otherwise, its energies will be devoted primarily to domestic concerns.

--Political succession will probably slow down the pace of Soviet-US relations and tend to a further gradual cooling. Selective detente, however, should remain the framework of Soviet foreign policy after Brezhnev. A loss of momentum in the conduct of detente need not result in an overall destabilization of the US-Soviet relationship.

--The Soviets' perceptions of their foreign economic requirements include both a desire to use Western technology in order to modernize the economy and the periodic necessity of importing food and feedgrains. On the other hand, the drop in Soviet oil production anticipated in the next few years will seriously erode Soviet hard currency earnings needed to purchase Western products. We expect Soviet choices over trade policies in the next few years to be difficult and contentious.

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- In SALT, any achievable strategic arms limitation agreement at this stage can at best temper the competition for some form of strategic advantage, primarily through restraining weapons development programs. A lapse of two to five years in SALT, on the other hand, especially without some arrangement to extend the Interim Agreement, would have an unsettling effect insofar as pressures for the development and deployment of new weapon systems will mount, and the hazard of a downward spiral in US-Soviet relations would increase.
- Other substantive and atmospheric strains in the bilateral relationship could also sufficiently cumulate and trouble the dialogue that any top-level decision on either side to resume a specific search for improved relations would encounter great difficulty, both in obtaining the support of a domestic consensus and in interesting the other superpower.
- In some circumstances, the potential for Soviet miscalculations in dealing with the non-Communist world would be considerably higher than in the recent past, and some Soviet leaders can intermittently

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be expected to urge that higher priority be given to maintenance of internal self-sufficiency, furthering the common objectives of the socialist movement, and, perhaps, projection of Moscow's influence elsewhere abroad, than to limited co-operation with the US. The foreign policy influence of these tougher elements could increase markedly if they come to believe that the then extant leadership threatens their perquisites and/or jeopardizes the security of the Soviet state. Such propensities to be accommodating with the West as exist would be overwhelmed by obduracy.

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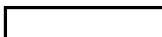
II. HOW ORDERLY A SUCCESSION?

If Brezhnev leaves power within the next year or two, how long and orderly or otherwise is the early succession period likely to be?

16. Our answer to this question is based primarily on our general understanding of the Soviet system--especially such precedents from the Stalin and Khrushchev successions as are likely to be most relevant--plus reasonably good information on key policy and political issues, and some (but inadequate) data on men likely to be key players in the Brezhnev succession. Brezhnev himself is unlikely to want or be able to arrange the succession definitively. Even if he manages to augment his present authority significantly, he probably will not share substantial power with a single heir presumptive. While Brezhnev may strengthen the position of several of the younger candidates, he will probably attempt to balance and circumscribe their power with extreme care to assure that none of them does to him what he, in similar circumstances, did to Khrushchev. He is also presumably aware of the risk either that his other lieutenants might shift their allegiance from the General Secretary to the heir presumptive, or that a designated heir becomes the principal target for other contenders and their patrons among the present leadership seniors.

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17. It is conceivable though unlikely that Brezhnev's colleagues might ease him into figurehead status should his performance become uneven enough to cause them to conclude he could no longer handle the general secretary job, instead of pushing him out of the leadership altogether into retirement, either honorable or otherwise. We attach perhaps a 10 percent possibility to this scenario. Brezhnev would find himself in the position of having to acquiesce in retreating into the honorary but largely ceremonial character of the presidency, and might prefer to keep his hand in than retire altogether. The collective would select a new party boss--perhaps Kirilenko, Brezhnev's present unofficial party deputy, but perhaps not--with Brezhnev quite possibly having an important or decisive say in the choice. Should this happen soon, an inner collective of the present key senior leaders like Suslov and Kosygin would share considerable power with the new party leader. Should one or more of the present seniors precede Brezhnev out of the picture, the inner collective would consist of the most senior and influential extant, and they would begin a period of tugging and hauling with the new party boss over effective authority in party affairs.

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Characteristics of An Early Brezhnev Succession

18. Typically in Soviet history there has been a two-phased succession: a first crisis when the incumbent is replaced as head of the Secretariat; and a second and longer troubled phase arising from the new senior secretary's attempts to arrogate all the powers of his predecessor, powers that he believes to be necessary to provide stable and effective leadership. The constant clashes of major institutions and the shifting alliances on issues in recent years, combined with the natural caution of an aged and experienced leadership, have resulted in lowest-common-denominator decisions and frequently in immobilism.

19. The collective leadership is the apex of the Soviet hierarchy and also the top forum for all major elements of the Soviet system: the party, government, economy, military and police, foreign affairs, and key domestic regions. Members of the Politburo and Secretariat determine national and foreign policy as a whole but individually also represent the above major elements and carry their associated political clout. The leadership is not fixed but is constantly shifting as leaders are removed or added and functions and portfolios are redistributed; the dynamics of

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top-level politics are played out in the Politburo and Secretariat. Any new political leader must gain a majority in the Politburo or be frustrated. Any who aspires to the top role must forge political majorities and at the very least avoid joining the minority on key issues. This has been Brezhnev's style.

20. Thus, the departure of Brezhnev may not change significantly the existing pattern of collective leadership in the short run. Seasoned by their long apprenticeship under Stalin, the present aged leaders will attempt to continue their policy of barring the road to the top to a young, energetic, and ambitious leader who might be tempted to push his programs with extreme methods. Collective leadership stands at the opposite pole from Stalinism as a method of Kremlin rule, and today's rulers find life much more stable and secure now than in the days of the dictator. Furthermore, much of what Americans view as lack of movement is seen by Soviets as consistency and stability, qualities traditionally prized by Russians.

21. Until objective realities force the top leadership to reassess their policy options it is quite unlikely that advocates of change from below can or will have much

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success in the next few years. It is even less likely that the system would permit a rank outsider to vault into the top level, bypassing the present hierarchy and political machine. Such a possibility would depend upon a catastrophic breakdown of the party system.

Probable Weakening of Leadership

22. While a new party leader was maneuvering to consolidate power, the leadership would probably have trouble taking decisions on complex policy matters. Policy lines would become fouled with political ones, and institutions just below the top leadership might temporarily exercise relatively more influence than usual on policy. If the party boss failed to consolidate power, the Secretariat might become an arena of acute conflict once more, as in the 1964-67 period. Another development, less likely but perhaps more threatening to Soviet political stability, could be a growth in the strength and assertiveness of the government vis-a-vis the party apparatus, such as occurred in the early post-Stalin years. Were either of these conditions to develop, the leadership's capacity to make urgent decisions on serious political and economic problems would be reduced, perhaps seriously, until such time as a younger, more vigorous

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man might assume the office and expand its powers. Meanwhile, the political arena might be even further widened to include at least temporary activation of institutional 'interest groups' in the military, the economic bureaucracy, the scientific establishment, and the creative intelligentsia.

Serious Economic and Political Problems to be Confronted in the Succession

23. The USSR currently faces serious economic and political problems, and the economic ones, in particular, are expected to worsen during the next half-dozen years. These problems will probably cause considerable division within the leadership, complicating efforts by Kirilenko or others to resolve an early Brezhnev succession and consolidate power. It is thus more likely than not that the early years of the succession will be more disorderly and troubled, at least within leadership circles.

24. The overriding problem is the slowdown in the growth of the economy, caused in large part by factors that will continue to operate: a steady decline in the output obtained from given increments of capital, increased costs of extracting raw materials, declining oil production, and reduced growth in the labor force. As a consequence, we

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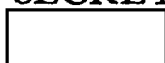
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expect annual growth in the early 1980s to decline to about 3 percent. Energy shortfalls and bad harvests might further yield one or more years of negligible or even negative growth. Tinkering with the administrative apparatus that directs the country's economic enterprises is unlikely to solve the problem, but a search for administrative solutions may well be made and could prove a contentious issue for the leadership in the early succession period.

25. Available alternative policy choices are bound to be contentious. Further reducing the rate of increase in consumption might adversely affect labor productivity and contribute to popular disaffection. Shifting industrial capacity from defense to the production of investment goods, or stretching out R&D and production schedules to slow the rate of expansion of defense-oriented industrial capacity, would have little effect, at least in the short run. Moreover, defense production is what the Soviets do best as well as the principal engine of Soviet power, and any encroachment on it would be anathema to many Soviet leaders as well as to the military establishment. Selective continued dependence on Western technology, while perhaps improving growth potential, would be expensive, politically controversial, and subject to

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Western willingness to cooperate. Options to augment the labor force--retaining older workers longer, bringing more young workers in by adjusting education policies, or reducing the armed services' term of service--might be somewhat less controversial to a succession leadership, but would have limited impact. Indeed, even a combination of measures, such as a leveling off defense production coupled with measures to obtain additional manpower, would probably raise economic growth only slightly. In the energy sector, our estimate is that the longer the leadership delays adoption of a top-priority program of feasible conservation and increased production, the greater the overall adverse economic impact. Such delays would be particularly difficult to avoid in a divided leadership.

26. Political problems that will face Brezhnev's successors include aging cadres throughout the party and an erosion of party discipline--a development serious enough to be noted in Brezhnev's report to the 25th Congress. Out-right political dissent in the USSR will undoubtedly continue to be a manageable, albeit embarrassing, problem. But the detente era and CSCE have set in motion currents of information and independence that will continue to prove very troublesome for Brezhnev's successors, involving repeated choices

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with contentious domestic and foreign policy implications. The nationalities question is likely to be manageable in the next half-dozen years since the Slavic leaders, if united, probably can cope with the non-Slavic quarter of the Soviet population. Somewhat further down the road, however, the nationalities problem may well become a more serious aggravation. The Soviets' East European empire has moderate to serious economic problems that will worsen with Soviet energy shortfalls, and which, combined with the seeds of detente, CSCE, and Eurocommunism, forecast a Soviet backyard that will be less stable than usual.

Kirilenko

26a. If Brezhnev does not soon take measures to prepare the way for a chosen heir, and should he depart from office in the next year or two, Kirilenko would have by far the best chance to assume it. As Brezhnev's chief deputy in the Politburo and party apparatus, with responsibility for internal party organization and its supervision of the economy, Kirilenko's superior claim to the requisite experience to be general secretary and his current access to the crucial levers of power strongly favors his candidacy

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in early contest for the succession to Brezhnev. There is evidence that Kirilenko has in recent years taken over more of the daily routine of running the CPSU, but it is not clear how far this has gone. He also appears to have strengthened his position within the past year through the appointment of a former associate, Ryabov, as a secretary of the Central Committee with the important defense industry portfolio, and at least partial responsibility for "'administrative organs.*'" Further, Kirilenko has publicly supervised meeting of the Council of Ministers.

27. Whether or not Brezhnev has deliberately fostered Kirilenko's strong tacit claim to the succession, he may welcome that claim as giving assurance, to himself and others, that the contingency of his own sudden incapacitation has been provided for. Moreover, given the long career association between the two men, Brezhnev may feel more secure with Kirilenko as his heir presumptive. Since Kirilenko's age necessarily limits how long he can serve as a stand-in for Brezhnev, however, his own impatience to obtain the top party post might produce increased tension between them with the passage of time, particularly if Brezhnev's performance

* The CPSU's euphemism for the organs of control, "'administrative organs'" include the KGB, the uniformed police, the military and the judiciary.

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comes into question. Indeed, although we have no reason to think Brezhnev is not happy with Kirilenko as interim successor, neither do we have any conclusive recent direct evidence on their relationship. Kirilenko's status has received some boosting in the last year, but Brezhnev does not appear to have been the booster. In any case Kirilenko's availability gives Brezhnev a plausible excuse for not grooming a younger, perhaps more dangerous, heir. If Kirilenko were deprived of his superior position, and Brezhnev failed to make new arrangements favoring a particular candidate, the prospects for an orderly transfer of Brezhnev's power--which in any event are dubious--would be worsened.

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28. Apart from the loss of Brezhnev's favor, Kirilenko must fear an alliance between Suslov as king-maker* and some other candidate for the succession, perhaps Kulakov, or more distantly, Romanov, the Leningrad party boss who appears to have ties to Suslov as well as to Brezhnev. Moreover, if the succession were initiated by a successful conspiracy or political maneuver, Kirilenko's prospects would depend on the part he had played in forcing Brezhnev from power. All things considered, a reasonable estimate of the probability that Kirilenko would become general secretary in an early succession is better than even, say 60 percent.

29. Consolidating his power to pull significantly in front of the collective in personal authority would be something else again. Even if Kirilenko won election as general secretary and survived a turbulent initial phase of the succession, his age and the magnitude of the economic and political problems that face the USSR in the next few years make it doubtful that he could bring relative stability to Soviet politics as Brezhnev did in the late 1960s. Little is known, however, either of Kirilenko's policy vision or his political acumen--key factors in predicting Kirilenko's chances for success. We might conceivably be surprised by a dynamic and even innovative

* Not himself inclined or suited (by age, health, and expertise) to actually run the party, so long as Suslov remains active his unique 30 years' experience in the Secretariat and unofficial role as senior custodian of both party ideology and collective rule give him a key say in who does run the party.

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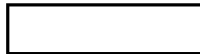
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Kirilenko in power. All things considered, however, a reasonable estimate of the probability that Kirilenko would be able to consolidate his rule and maintain it for several years is less than even, say 30 percent.

30. There is perhaps a 30 percent chance that someone else will succeed Brezhnev even initially. Should Kirilenko suffer Podgorny's fate in the next year or two, or be himself incapacitated,* Kulakov currently is probably immediately best placed of the younger figures for the party succession. He is the only secretary of the next generation of Soviet leaders who is simultaneously a member of the Politburo. At 59, he appears, in the few glimpses Westerners get of him, to project well politically among his colleagues. Although he is presumably generally acquainted with the country's business from six years of participation in Politburo and 12 in Secretariat deliberations, his own portfolio has been almost exclusively agriculture and he has not been given broad party responsibilities to oversee personally. Should Kulakov become party boss, either instead of or after Kirilenko, he would probably be the more under constraints of the leadership collective, since his current experience, power base and party

* Kirilenko is a few months older than Brezhnev. We have almost no data on his health. In the absence of significant negative indicators, however--some of which, did they exist, probably would become known--we assume that he is in reasonably good health for his age.

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authority, at least, are much less striking than Kirilenko's. Over time, however, the tension between Kulakov's personal authority and the collective's authority would work its way out to oligarchy, his clear preeminence, or some balance between the two.

31. While in the closed system of CPSU politics the next party leader or two is unlikely to come from outside the present top leadership, he could be any number of people now in it. These leaders each at present have one or more handicaps to overcome in filling out their credentials for a claim to the top job, but if the Brezhnev succession is delayed or, as may well happen, in two or more stages, one or more of these men could well improve their power and experience.

32. Of otherwise promising young candidates, Romanov and Shcherbitsky, for example, have not worked in the central Secretariat, or even in a responsible capacity in Moscow. Unless they are brought into the Secretariat in the very near future, they will lack both the experience and the power base needed to assert an effective claim to Brezhnev's office if it were vacated within the next year or two. Of those currently in the central Secretariat who might suddenly be elevated into the Politburo, some, like Dolgikh and Ryabov, lack experience with and access to the organizational levers of powers; others,

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like Kapitonov, lack broad policy experience. The chances of any of these are low now, but may well improve substantially over the next two to five years.

Possible Emergence of a Strong and Effective Ruler

33. The analysis presented previously indicates that an early Brezhnev succession would probably lead to a weakening of the leadership's capacity to deal with the worsening problems confronting it. Are there circumstances in which an early Brezhnev succession might have the opposite result, that is, lead to a strengthened leadership better able to cope with these problems? Several of the necessary conditions presently exist which could provide an able and ambitious candidate for the succession with large opportunities for aggradizing personal power:

- There is a manifest need to rejuvenate both the Politburo and the Central Committee, which have grown old and complacent during Brezhnev's reign.
- There is a similar need to purge the middle levels, where bureaucratic tenure and promotion based on seniority have fostered stagnation and caused some loss of discipline.
- There is a substantial reserve of able and relatively young officials whose ambition for rapid advance has

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been frustrated by Brezhnev's conservative personnel policies. If a candidate for the succession could mobilize the support of these men, by rewarding them with positions in the Central Committee and the Politburo he might be able to create a powerful personal machine that could dominate the Soviet political system.

--The relatively poor performance of the Soviet system in recent years, which is reflected in reduced economic growth and in the failure to fulfill high expectations of foreign policy successes, could provide the basis for an appeal to patriotic and Communist sentiments for support in overhauling the political system in order to compete more effectively on the world scene.

34. Militating against the rapid rise of a powerful and innovative new general secretary is the apparent capacity and determination of bureaucratic groups to protect their institutional and personal privileges from reformist measures and arbitrary commands imposed from above. Normally the system penalizes innovators and risk takers. A leader possessed of a powerful will and superior cunning would be needed to overcome their resistance, and it is hard to discern such a

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figure close to the peaks of power. Still, it cannot be ruled out that a Romanov, a Kulakov, a Dolgikh, even a Kirilenko, may possess the requisite qualities but is obliged to conceal them temporarily so as not to provoke his colleagues. The probability that a leader will emerge to capitalize on the conditions favoring strong personal rule is a bare 10 percent in the next two years, perhaps 20 to 30 percent in the next five years. Such a succession scenario would probably impact most on US interests as the party chief would be less dependent on the collective and freer to pursue dynamic policies, for better or worse.

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